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ABSTRACT

This booklet, which was produced as a follow-up to the Fifth International Conference on Adult Education, examines literacy in the world and its major regions. After a brief overview of the workshop from which the booklet emerged, the need to reconceptualize literacy as a tool for learning throughout life is emphasized. Discussed next are the following: the sharp differences between literacy rates in industrialized and developing countries and the relationship between illiteracy and other aspects of human and social development; literacy rates and literacy education trends and needs in Africa, the Arab States, and Latin America; lessons learned from large-scale literacy programs; the role of local communities, associations, and businesses in making literacy education a component of local development; and strategies for using literacy education to improve the situation of women and to help them gain responsibility and autonomy. The following are among the points made in the booklet's conclusion: (1) practitioners must be trained to recognize the problems in development; (2) development agencies and educators must understand each other's language; (3) institutions and structures must be created in the context of initiatives; (4) the human, financial, and institutional capital elements of local development must be emphasized; and (5) literacy must be imparted in the local and national languages before being imparted in global languages. (MN)

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ED 435 000

A series of 29 booklets documenting workshops held at the Fifth International Conference on Adult Education

3a Literacy in the world

Literacy in the world and its major regions

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Booklets under this theme:

3a Literacy in the world and its major regions
3b Literacy and learning strategies
3c Literacy, education and social development
3d Literacy research, evaluation and statistics
3e Literacy in multilingual/intercultural settings
3f Literacy and technology
3g Literacy for tomorrow

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Foreword

In July 1997 the Fifth International Conference on Adult Education was held in Hamburg, organised by UNESCO and in particular the UNESCO Institute for Education, the agency's specialist centre on adult learning policy and research. Approximately 1500 delegates attended from all regions of the world, with representatives of 140 member states and some 400 NGOs. In addition to the work of the commissions and plenary which debated the official documents of the Conference The Hamburg Declaration and The Agenda for the Future, there were 33 workshops organised around the themes and sub-themes of the Conference.

As part of its CONFINTEA follow-up strategy, the UNESCO Institute for Education has produced this series of 29 booklets based on the presentations and discussions held during the Conference. The recordings of all the workshops were transcribed and synthesized over one year, edited, and then formatted and designed. A tremendous amount of work has gone into this process. Linda King, coordinator of the monitoring and information strategy for CONFINTEA, was responsible for overseeing the whole process. Madhu Singh, senior research specialist at UIE, undertook the mammoth task of writing almost all the booklets based on an analysis of the sessions. She was helped in the later stages by Gonzalo Retamal, Uta Papen and Linda King. Christopher McIntosh was technical editor, Matthew Partridge designed the layout and Janna Lowrey was both transcriber and translator.

The booklets are intended to draw out the central issues and concerns of each of the CONFINTEA workshops. They are the memory of an event that marked an important watershed in the field of adult learning. We hope that they will be of use both to those who were able to attend CONFINTEA V and those who were not. We look forward to your comments, feedback and continuing collaboration with the UNESCO Institute for Education.

Paul Bélanger,
Director, UNESCO Institute for Education, Hamburg
and Secretary General of CONFINTEA

Literacy in the world and its major regions

Introduction

Adult literacy for all who need it must be made an urgent priority. In all countries, North and South, all adults need continued and improved access to knowledge. They may be trying to acquire the rudiments of literacy or they may be endeavouring to keep abreast of the global explosion of information in every field. In addition, meeting the basic learning needs of adults is a key element in reducing world poverty.

Furthermore, tensions are increasing between the culture of tradition and the homogenising influences of globalisation and consequently there is a strong need for adult literacy programmes to respond to some of the adverse impacts that have been created. In this way learners can become aware of what is happening in the world, make changes and take control of what happens to them. As the world is pulled closer together it is imperative that the cultural diversity of people and pluralism of societies be recognised. Literacy is a crucial levelling opportunity and key for maintaining peace and stability in the world.

These issues were discussed at the workshop "Literacy in the world and its major regions" held at the Fifth International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA V), in Hamburg in July 1997. The first part of the workshop "Literacy in the New Environment and the Evolving Society" included a review of current practice in literacy and an analysis of past experiences and new trends. Following the introductory keynote speech by Victor Ordonez (UNESCO/PROAP), short presentations of the situation in some developing regions were made by Joice Kibhati, Kenya, Maria Lourdes Khan (ASPBAE), Jules Didacus, Saint Lucia, Hacim El Safi, Sudan, Aicha Belarbi, Morocco, and Ana del Toro (INEA), Mexico.

The second part focused on Africa where decentralisation has created new forms of self-government and empowerment opportunities for civil institutions, but which also present major challenges for adult education, the main issue being the role that adult learning and training have played in decentralisation and bottom-up development. This session was chaired by Peter Easton, Programme d'Appui au Développment Local au Sahel (PADLOS), Florida State University, USA and J.M. Ahlin, Byll Cataria, Suisse Development Cooperation. The panel consisted of Dana Fischer, Club du Sahel/OECD; Moustapha Yacouba, Projet d' Appui au Développement Local au Sahel (PADLOS), Comité Inter-état de Lutte contre la Sécherresse au Sahel, Tchad; Coumba Boly (Institut Panafricain pour le Développement/Afrique de l'ouest/Sahel (IPDAOS); and Laouali Malam Moussa (INDRAP), Niger.

This workshop dealt primarily with the developing world. The complex problem of low levels of literacy in industrialised countries was discussed at a separate workshop "Literacy and basic skills for community development in industrialised countries", and consisted of video presentations, focusing on social, linguistic and ethnic problems of adult learners and young adults in Slovenia, France, Canada and the Czech Republic. These videos are available for reference in the UIE library.

National policies on literacy and adult learning have evidently benefited from discussions on this topic at many international conferences. Following CONFINTEA V there is also hope that as we enter the next millennium we are likely to see a more literate world.

Reconceptualising literacy

Literacy can no longer be simply defined in terms of reading, writing or numeracy, nor can it be seen as an end in itself. People must be able to adapt continually to developments in science, technology, and to the pressures for social integration, participation and democratisation. The world is becoming more visual than before, and the ability to understand images is just as important as to understand words. Therefore literacy has to be seen as a tool for learning throughout life.

Research findings over the past several years have contributed significantly to a rethinking on the concept of literacy. They state:

- Literacy is a positive factor in human capacity building. It is an enabling factor, releasing people's capacities, rather than giving deprived individuals what they do not have. It is the core engine of human development and, in this respect, its impact has to be seen in terms of its benefit to communities and individuals, rather than merely in terms of whether individuals are able to read and write or sign their names. Literacy expands our scope to act, while extending our duties and responsibilities.

- As the world enters the next century, more skills are demanded. As a result the demand for literacy is increasing, whether functional literacy, computer literacy, of civic literacy.

- The sharp division between illiteracy and literacy needs to be overcome by recognising the inherent wisdom of every individual, whether he can read or not.

New information technologies are bound to separate the haves from the have-nots. The real challenge for literacy practitioners and policy makers is to see that this does not happen and that literacy reaches the marginalised.

A new paradigm of literacy is emerging. In the rush to meet the demands of the 21st century, it is important to recognise three enduring principles:

1 Human development must be the foundation of all economic and social development as well as of sustainable development. The latter concept is particularly important in view of the fact that our planet has to be passed on to future generations.

2 Peace can only be attained through intellectual and moral solidarity of mankind, and by the promotion of education as a foundation for peace, freedom and democracy.

3 Literacy is a means to empowerment.

The problems of literacy relate not only to organisational structure, teaching material, languages, subjects, teaching and the training of facilitators but more importantly to the way literacy is conceptualised.

Adult literacy and illiteracy

Despite the increase in the world population, great strides have been made to increase the number of literates, though there are sharp differences between industrialised and developing countries.

The growth in the number of literate men and women in the world is expected to continue for the foreseeable future. Nevertheless the number of illiterate adults has remained at about 885 million since 1980, with females still outnumbering males.

The Jomtien conference on Education for All (EFA) as well as the Beijing World Conference stressed the importance of making education a top priority of girls. Although a consensus regarding girls' education at the level of national policy may have been achieved, at the local level, in villages throughout the world, there are still a large percentage of girls not attending school with the result that in some countries the gender gap is 20 per cent literacy among women and 60 per cent literacy among men.

Data on the distribution of the adult population by level of educational attainment also show substantial regional disparities. Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia have large proportions of adults who either have no formal schooling or have an incomplete primary education. These adults constitute the primary target group for adult basic education.

Out of the 200 countries and territories throughout the world, about 374 million of the illiterates are located in only nine countries, which also happen to be the nine most populous countries in the world. More than half the illiterates of the world live in India and China combined, and quarter more in seven other nations.

Literacy statistics also reveal the relationship between illiteracy and other aspects of human and social development. For example, it has been shown that a strong correlation exists between female literacy, and the number of children and women's fertility. In Brazil, for example, those who left school after four years have an average number of 6.5 children, whereas those who completed more than four years of schooling have an average number of 2.5 children. Similar trends can be seen the world over. Statistics also show the correlation between literacy and longevity and infant mortality.

Literacy programmes have been launched in several countries, such as Tanzania, Cuba, and more recently India. Campaigns are also being started in Pakistan and Bangladesh. However, in some countries, these have brought only short-term rewards. In order to be successful,

literacy campaigns require a great deal of support from governments for a specific period of time and the establishment of post-literacy projects and a literate environment so that people do not lapse back into illiteracy.

Literacy in Africa

Like many developing nations, illiteracy is very high in sub-Saharan Africa. Compared to other regions of the world, it is a region with the world's highest illiteracy rate (54%). However, there is a considerable difference from one country to another. Whereas in countries such as Kenya, Tanzania, Zimbabwe, Botswana and South Africa the literacy rate is about 70 per cent, in countries such as Uganda, Malawi, Burundi and Rwanda the literacy rates are below 49 per cent. Nevertheless, there is a lot of enthusiasm in literacy work and a growing realisation that literacy is crucial in the context of integrated programmes for imparting messages on population, health, and agriculture and in the struggle to escape poverty, and in this respect programmes are being developed in "cushioning" the poor from the negative influences of structural adjustment programmes.

Literacy is also important for creating a conducive learning environment at home for children. Women are more effectively empowered through access to literacy training and adult learning opportunities. There is also a belief that women's health, fertility and nutrition would be enhanced if female literacy rates could be increased. Advocacy groups like the Forum for African Women Educationists promote education of women and girls and see this as crucial for women's participation in political decision-making processes. Associations and organisation are also playing a key role in mobilising learning.

Although there has been a considerable number of literacy programmes through this region, a few countries have nevertheless witnessed falling literacy rates, such as Botswana and South Africa, and there is still a high illiteracy rate among women (63 per cent) compared to men (37 per cent). So there is still a lot of work to be done to eradicate illiteracy.

Literacy in the Arab States

In the Arab states which stretch from Atlantic Africa to Asia in the Arab Gulf the illiterate population has decreased to 43 percent. For men the rate has fallen from 45 per cent in 1980 to 23 per cent in 1995; for women it has fallen from 71 per cent to 56 per cent, though several of the less developed Arab States are still encountering difficulties.

Several factors have been responsible for the decline of illiteracy in the Arab states. There has been continuing expansion of primary education in Saudi Arabia. In Egypt, a literacy campaign has been underway since 1993. Tunisia has evolved a new strategy to eradicate illiteracy. A Jordanian programme has intensified efforts in regions of wide-spread illiteracy with the hope of decreasing the rate to 8 per cent by the year 2000.

There has been a qualitative development in most Arab states, particularly in the design of new literacy programmes, paying particular attention to environment, health, demographic problems, the consolidation of religious values and family coherence, freedom, self-reliance, the principles of democracy, civic education, the fight against extremism and the abuse of drugs. Special attention is also given to post-literacy schemes in formal, informal and open learning situations. Programmes for adults have a strong cultural component in them.

Most Arab states support the effort with regard to literacy under the umbrella of a commission or higher council, represented by the ministries and related institutions, universities and voluntary bodies, such as women's organisations and youth studies' associations.

Measures are being taken to create an Arab union for adult education charged with ensuring coordination of academic and voluntary efforts related to this field at the regional level.

Cooperation among Arab states plays an important role in the field of literacy and adult education. The linguistic unity as well as the geographical bonds and the common culture provide a solid base for regional cooperation.

Yet, illiteracy remains a serious problem in the Arab region, where the number of illiterate adults reaches more than 65 million people. The less developed Arab states are still encountering difficulties.

Latin America: from adult literacy to basic adult education

Latin America provides a contrast with regard to adult literacy and learning. More than in other regions of the world the trend in Latin America is toward the very concept of literacy to mean basic education for adults, closely linked to the economic, political and social development of individuals and communities. This trend can be seen in specific areas of Brazil, Mexico, Chile, Argentina and Uruguay. Here, programmes are seeking to meet the basic learning needs of those who use them, whether it is the knowledge and skills a farmer requires to be an active participant in a rural community, political literacy for citizens in countries that have recently moved toward democratic forms of government, or diverse and flexible approaches for senior citizens with a variety of interests and activities. Particular emphasis is being given to dealing with issues of marginalisation and equity, such as those affecting girls and women, people in rural areas and the poor.

Lessons learned from large-scale literacy programmes

There are many lessons to be learned from large-scale literacy programmes. The basic requirements for promoting literacy in a sustained way are:

- the political will and commitment of society as a whole, including the media, industry and civil society;
- core funding and human resources through partnerships between government, NGOs and local communities;
- for people to understand the need for it, want it and ask for it, any campaign or effort being driven by the demand from the community itself.
- for programmes to be culturally relevant, sensitive to the diversity of learners, the learning processes and learning needs, and designed for as many special sub-groups of individuals as possible;
- a literate environment in which neo-literates can continue to operate, in order to be able to take advantage of the learning and literacy;

- for people to be helped to deal with the adverse effects of globalisation, so that can take control of what happens to them and to be proactive;
- programmes that integrate literacy with health, environmental and population education;
- participatory and interactive approaches;
- the support of other partners as it is not enough for one agency or one government to take full responsibility;
- a new conceptual framework for policy makers, designers of programmes and providers to view their mandate in a different way;
- for bridges to be built between other disciplines, other groups of people and organisations, and between formal and non-formal education;
- for it to be integrated into the promotion and support of other issues such as peace, human rights or the empowerment of women.

Literacy, decentralisation and local power: role of local communities, associations and businesses

An important question with regard to literacy, decentralisation and local power is: how do local communities, associations and businesses acquire or mobilise the competence, the skill and the knowledge required to assume new functions and new powers and to promote new activities. The Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA) has funded a series of continuing research studies on topics such as the practical application of Koranic learning in African countries, how women acquire management skills in income generating activities, and on the powers for learning in the informal sector of the urban economy. ADEA is also supporting the Programme d'Appui au développement Local au Sahel (PADLOS) whose research seeks to find out how communities mobilise themselves, what skills are necessary to assume new functions, and what can be learned from that. In effect it starts with the demand side of the education equation. Agencies like the Club du Sahel are concerned with topics such as food security and management of natural resources, but in the course of their own work realise that they cannot go further without adult education and training of the local people. Thus adult learning becomes an essential component of any development project.

However, before training programmes can be designed it is necessary to ask the following questions: At what level are new responsibilities, powers and functions within communities assumed? How do people get their skills in order to exercise their new responsibilities? What role do the various training and education programmes and systems existing in these communities play in the new programme?

Southern Mali

For the last 15 years many village communities have been taking over full responsibility for the marketing of their agricultural crops, thanks to the intervention of an adult education programme in the local language. This was followed by a stage-by-stage assumption of responsibility for management of these co-operatives. This movement has helped to generate capital savings that have enabled the people to invest in other local activities, such as water retention, grain storage schemes, and health delivery systems, and which in turn have generated employment for other people who require adult learning as their base.

Senegal

Programmes like TOSTAN in Senegal, have started offering programmes for women that also aim to promote women's self-esteem. These have been designed by local women themselves with management training. Women trained and organised in this way have initiated a move to get local authorities to ban female circumcision and have already been successful in the peanut growing area of Senegal.

Ghana

Local young people returning, after migration to the coast to their village, intervened in a land dispute between church members and adherents of a traditional religion over the drying up of a stream and a lake that had magical powers in the traditional religion, but which had been cursed by the priests of the fundamentalist sect.

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These series of examples demonstrate how local people who have either been granted additional power to carry out development functions, or have assumed it themselves, have acquired new knowledge as a result. They describe what people actually take over and do at the ground level, and how they get the skills to do it.

This movement towards local responsibility is very widespread and growing, but because it is constrained by a number of difficulties, it is uneven. Further, information on other programmes of decentralisation is very fragmentary. Although some decentralisation projects fail, the successful experiences are those that manage in one way or another to pull together three disparate but critically related elements, namely:

- Financial capitalisation – some source of income generation that can be used to pay for the operating costs of the activity, reinvested in other activities or saved.

- Institutional capitalisation – which means forming the structures that allow the activity to be organised, savings to be collected, decisions made on dispensing the money or the resources that have been generated, and ensure some democratic accountability.

- Technical capacity and its application

All these three capacities need to be sustained, or the project will collapse unless held up by outside aid, money, support and political measures. Often, the technical and financial portion of the activity is well developed, but there is no strong institutional base that anchors it in the community. In other cases, the institutional base exists, but people do not have the necessary skills to run it. This is why adult learning is so important.

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The critical ability in a development activity is literacy

Fitting these three dimensions together is not easy. The critical ability here is that of literacy. In any development activity people need to develop these successive levels of skill and work out, with those in charge of the financial or institutional elements, a pedagogy by which people can acquire a skill, apply it and acquire the next one. For example, although local people can be empowered to take over the markets or co-operatives, providing they have enough skills and literacy to do so, the running of co-operatives and businesses relies heavily on adult educators working with credit providers and co-operative officials to analyse the market. People can take over functions and responsibilities but they have got to understand that the first level is learning numbers, registering things, reading scales and price lists. The next level is to begin with addition and subtraction and only then can the management of stock warehouses be taken over.

The adult learning systems where people pulled all kinds of skills together included schools, hanging around in the neighbourhood, literacy programmes, Koranic schools etc. Communities drew on all these sources in diverse ways.

The lesson to be learned is that in order to support initiatives of empowerment it is necessary to think in terms of the three essential elements. The role of outside support should be the creation of the right conditions and resources. Literacy is not difficult if the conditions exist that allow people to acquire it.

Taking over responsibility, autonomy and education: the situation of women

The support needed for women to gain responsibility, autonomy and education is inevitably linked to the economic contribution of women and their place within the economy, politics and the labour market. On a world-wide level, 67 per cent of the working-time is covered by women. Yet women:

- get only 10 per cent of the world revenue;
- make up two-thirds of the world's illiterates;
- own just 1 per cent of the world's property;
- make up 70 per cent of the needy or poor population, i.e. one billion individuals world-wide;
- 65 to 90 per cent of all working women in the industrialised countries work part-time, combining family life with professional life;
- 45 % of women who are economically active world-wide occupy the lower paid jobs, aside from domestic work.
- Ministerial posts concerning decisions on financial and human resources or development are rarely occupied by women.

There are however several constraints to women's education. In rural areas women are prevented from participation in education or literacy activities on account of their work load. Educational actions do not take into account the cultural contexts of women. In Niger, for example, women have asked for literacy and technical education classes to be held at night because they do not want to be seen going to public places nor give the impression of idling away their time. Pedagogical methods are not linked to the needs of women. There is a lack of information and education in the local languages. Poverty of women and rising costs of education mean they cannot always afford access to education. Often they require the agreement of husbands and fathers to participate in education. In spite of policies favouring women's and girls' education, the amount spent on women's education is insignificant.

Yet, in spite of the above economic and educational constraints, women are beginning to see possibilities for their empowerment. Women have become a priority in political discourses. They have started to organise themselves, helped by the current climate of democratisation

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and decentralisation. Financial institutions are more inclined to lend money to women's association as women have higher credit repayment rates than men. Women take their commitments seriously. They are increasingly taking on the role as head of their families as well as taking over new functions in local development.

In this new context of decentralisation and local development, where women are assuming new functions, the main strategies should be to educate women for autonomy and responsibility for assuming their functions within local institutions: the amount of a woman's workload must be reduced and shared between girls and boys and men and women. Women need to have access to information to keep them abreast of the new developments in all fields. The knowledge and local languages of women must be valued and promoted. Local development activities must help to fight women's poverty.

Strategies for women's responsibilities, autonomy and education must include:

- personal and individual commitment in the sphere of women's education;
- information;
- participation in education programmes and projects;
- partnership: women must form partnerships between themselves, their organisations, and other groups or structures, in order to benefit from different kinds of support – technical, financial or other.

Conclusion

The workshop concluded with the following recommendations for adult literacy and local communities:

- local development programmes learning and taking advantage of other on-going projects;
- training the practitioners to enable them to recognise the problems in development;
- development agencies and educators understanding each other's language;
- creating institutions and structures in the context of initiatives;
- prioritising women;
- placing emphasis on three essential elements of local development: human, financial and institutional capital;
- local languages in administration, information dissemination and education;
- building bridges between formal and non-formal education; and between formal school education and adult learning programmes;
- imparting literacy first in the local and national languages and then in global languages of communications;
- enhancing capacity of state services to take over the role of facilitator, educator, regulator and agent for local investment in a more decentralised system. It is necessary for agents of the state to cooperate with the local communities in order to identify local needs and to satisfy these.

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The CONFINTEA logo, designed by Michael Smitheram of Australia, represents the lines on the palm of a hand. These lines are universal and yet different for each subject. They celebrate cultural diversity and the joy of learning.

Theme 3

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